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ABSTRACT

The role of culture in the classroom is of increasing interest to teachers and researchers alike. Teachers communicate from unique perspectives and backgrounds; the same is true of students. Many differing cultures are represented in today's classroom, and consequently, many differences in approaches and preferences are represented. Research clearly indicates that students of differing cultural backgrounds benefit differentially by the efforts and methods of the instructor. Generally, minorities benefit the least from the educational system. To better understand why members of certain minority groups are performing less well than students from the dominant culture, an investigation of classroom interaction is worthwhile. How cultural factors can place a student at risk is shown by a literature review which focuses on several areas of difference that can impact the success of interactions in the classroom, specifically intercultural communication differences, learning differences across cultures, and a cultural-deficit perspective of "at risk." Findings suggest that there is ample research on which to base a claim that students are placed at risk because the culture of mainstream education fails to acknowledge and account for the many cultural differences that affect and exist in the classroom. Students who possess and appreciate the communication behaviors and approaches to learning that are fostered and rewarded in the mainstream classroom are certainly at an advantage over those who possess differing communication behaviors and learning approaches. Researchers should continue to investigate ways to help students overcome risk barriers. (Contains 38 references.) (NKA)

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Running head: CULTURE AND THE AT-RISK STUDENT

# Acknowledging Culture in the Classroom: An Exploration of the At-risk Student

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of culture in the classroom is of increasing interest to teachers and researchers alike. The notion that cultural differences are present in the classrooms of today and that they can impact the quality of classroom interaction is noteworthy. Teachers, just like anyone else, communicate from unique perspectives and backgrounds. As well, students in the classroom each represent an unique individual who is influenced by many lived experiences, including those influenced by culture. The field of intercultural communication informs us of many differences in the ways in which people communicate and process information. Research on learning differences informs us of many different ways in which students from differing cultures function in the classroom. Cultural differences can provide rich opportunities for new experiences and to learn of differing perspectives; cultural differences can also be the cause of great misunderstandings.

In the classrooms of today, many differing cultures are represented, and consequently, many differences in approaches and preferences are represented. With differing cultures in the classroom, we also experience many different styles of communication. Some students represent cultures that place greater value on the spoken word than others. Some cultures value the authority of the teacher, while others place less value on his or her contributions. In short, it seems appropriate to consider the classroom as a place that holds a range of academic abilities, interests, values, learning styles, communication strategies and abilities, and cognitive styles, to name a few.

Given the diversity in the classroom, students are affected differentially by the efforts and methods of the instructor. The assumption that the classroom is a place where intercultural breakdowns can and do occur has great merit.

Research clearly indicates that students of differing cultural backgrounds benefit

differentially from today's education. Generally, minorities benefit the least from our educational system. Some argue that the system, in its current form, is Eurocentric in nature and fails to fully address the diversity that is ever so present in our classrooms (Bennett, 1990; Winborne & Dardaine-Ragguet, 1993). "The fact that our schools tend to be monoethnic, despite the array of diverse learning styles associated with different ethnic groups, helps explain the high drop-out rates among Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans" (Bennett, 1990, p. 158).

Research on the success rates of differing ethnic groups abounds, and minorities are repeatedly shown to benefit less from education (Darling & Abrams, 1989; Chesebro, et. al., 1992; Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). Minority status has been correlated with academic failure to the point that some researchers report it as an identifier of at-risk status (Blount & Wells, 1992; Presseisen, 1988). Further, Chesebro et. al. (1992) note that there is a correlation between dropout rates and ethnicity. At the college level, Allen, Epps, & Haniff (1991) claim, "Black students have lower academic achievement levels ... and higher attrition or dropout rates than do white students" (p. 7). Interestingly, when compared to black students on white campuses; black students on black campuses report friendlier interactions with teachers (Hemmons, 1982), are more likely to complete the baccalaureate degree (Green, 1989, p. 3), and "are significantly more favorable about their relations with white faculty" (Allen & Haniff, 1991, p. 104).

In an attempt to better understand why members of certain minority groups are performing less well than students from the dominant culture, an investigation of classroom interaction is worthwhile. Looking at this situation from a cultural perspective, one has reason to question the impact of cultural differences on student success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

"[T]here is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture. This means personality, how people express themselves (including shows of emotion), the way they think, how they move, [and] how problems are solved ..." (Hall, 1976, p. 16). Differences do exist cross-culturally, and the classroom is a place where people from differing cultural backgrounds come together in an attempt to gain insights and abilities. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to show how cultural factors can place a student at-risk. The following literature review focuses on several areas of difference that can impact the success of interactions in the classroom. Specifically, I examine intercultural communication differences, learning differences across cultures, and a cultural-deficit perspective of at-risk.

### Intercultural communication differences

Extensive literature exists that reveals the extent to which cultures differ in their communication behaviors and preferences. A survey of the literature on intercultural communication differences shows extreme variation in how people communicate. For instance, Ribeau, Baldwin, and Hecht (1997) claim, "Since different ethnic groups have different shared histories and ways of seeing the world, ... the unspoken, often subconscious, rules that one co-culture has for effective or satisfying communication may differ from those imposed by another" (p. 148). Moreover, "Misunderstandings and other obstacles are likely when any two persons navigate the stream of differing symbols, norms, competencies, and styles, but when the persons are of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds this process can be even more difficult" (Hecht, Collier, and Ribeau, 1993, p. 26-7).

The degree to which cultural differences affect meaning is extensive and often hard to identify in day-to-day, taken-for-granted communication.

> Contrary to popular belief, the many diverse groups that make up our country have proved to be surprisingly persistent in maintaining their separate identities. Superficially, these groups may all look alike and sound somewhat alike, but beneath the surface are manifold unstated, unformulated differences in their structuring of time, space, materials, and relationships. It is these very differences that often result in the distortion of meaning, regardless of good intentions, when peoples of different cultures interact. (Hall, 1966, p. x)

Many of the differences in the way people communicate may go unnoticed, because the differences are not part of the actual verbal communication.

In his research that focused on nonverbal communication between lower-class African Americans and middle-class whites, Hall (1966) found that differences in the use of time, voice, feet, hands, body, eyes, and space are potential areas for misunderstandings (p. 182). Hall further shows how such differences could result in the motivation of a black interviewee going undetected by a white interviewer (p. 183). According to Hall, blacks are aware that their white counterparts are not "reading" them correctly (p. 183). Additionally, Hall claims, "few people grasp the fact that cultural differences of the type that many [African-Americans] experience as isolating, while exacerbated by prejudice, are not the same as prejudice, nor are they inherently prejudicial" (Hall, 1966, p. 166).

Nonverbal differences can affect the way in which people perceive their environment. For instance, proxemic patterns of cultures can reveal "cultural frames that determine the structure of a given people's perceptual world." Differences in how people perceive the world leads to differences in interaction among its inhabitants (Hall, 1966, p. 163-4).

Specific nonverbal differences between cultures are clearly identified through the literature. Hall (1966) discusses differences in the use of space. He found that

Japanese and European concepts of space are different from that of Americans (p. 52). Hall also found differences in the way Japanese and Americans organize their cities (p. 149).

Hall (1966) claims that differences between the dominant and minority cultures are affected by core values that are learned early in one's life (p. 165). Aiello and Jones (1971) found support for Hall's claim through their investigation of the use of space by white, black, and Puerto Rican children. Aiello and Jones found that white children stand farther apart than black and Puerto Rican children. These differences in the use of space were found in children as young as six to eight years of age (p. 355).

In his book, The Hidden Dimension, Hall (1966) discusses, among many other areas of communicative difference, differences in the use of eye contact. He further discusses how differences in the use of eye contact can lead to misunderstandings for culturally-different communicators (p. 143). For instance, Hall discusses the potential for conflict resulting from differences in the use of eye contact between American and Arab communicators. One Arab subject reported that on several instances he was misinterpreted by American men who thought his intense eye contact was a sign of aggression. "Arabs look each other in the eye when talking with an intensity that makes most Americans highly uncomfortable" (Hall, 1966, p. 161). LaFrance and Mayo (1976) also found differences in the use of eye contact between whites and blacks. They claim, "gaze pattern differences can produce miscuing and awkwardness of conversational flow" (p. 551). The eye contact used by blacks while members of an audience is another area for misinterpretation by the white participant. Williams (1972) shows how the eye contact and responses of the black listener could be misinterpreted by whites. For instance, the eye contact of blacks can appear as less attentive than that of white audience members. Whites who speak before a black audience may misinterpret this difference in the use of eye contact as inattentiveness,



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which as Williams points out, is not the case (Williams, p. 106).

Differences in communication behaviors not only exist in uses of nonverbal behavior but also in the verbal behaviors of people. Differences certainly can be found in individuals' desire for verbal communication, their level of expressiveness, types of messages communicated. Grossman (1995) specifically notes differences in the communication sought by students of differing cultural backgrounds. "Compared to European[-]American students, many, but not all, nonEuropean[-]American students, especially Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Filipino Americans, and Southeast Asian Americans tend to be more interested in obtaining their teachers' direction and feedback" (Grossman, 1995, p. 265).

Differences in the interpretation of verbal messages can lead to serious conflict between communicators. Whites may misinterpret the communication of some African Americans as more aggressive than was intended. Kochman (1981) suggests that verbal disputes can be viewed quite differently by African-Americans and whites. Kochman claims that whites are more likely to perceive a verbal dispute as more threatening and likely to lead to violence than blacks. Moreover, under the assumption that the one who feels most threatened in a verbal dispute will physically strike first, Kochman claims that whites are more likely to move from verbal dispute to physical confrontation (58-9). Hecht, Collier, and Ribeau (1993) state, "African[-] American style is described as assertive by some, forceful by others, and aggressive by still others. Each is describing a style of communication that is intense, outspoken, challenging, and forward." Other people use terms such as "belligerent and hostile" (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993, p. 104).

Additionally, the call and response exchange identified in the communication of blacks may be misinterpreted by some whites. Weber (1991) tells of a time when she was giving a lecture on African-American history and witnessed such a

misinterpretation. One black student responded during the lecture with comments such as "all right," "make it plain," and "teach." Several other blacks in the audience responded in a similar way. Weber noticed that this call and response exchange "surprised and confused some of the white students." When later asked about the situation, the white students said "they were not used to having more than one person talk at a time, and they really could not talk and listen at the same time" (Weber, 1991, p. 279). Edwards and Sienkewicz (1990) claim that the "socially dominant group" has the responsibility "to avoid assuming either that there is only one way of handling discussion or that their own approach is inherently superior" (p. 197).

Nonstandard dialect can be another area for conflict in communication between blacks and whites. The mainstream speech style "fiercely ostracized in Black street teen culture" is rewarded in mainstream culture (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993, p. 88). Conversely, "[t]he stigma attached by dominant culture to nonstandard dialects and forms may prove costly for African American speech style" (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993, p. 88). For instance, Akinnaso and Ajirotutu (1982) claim that for equally qualified job applicants, the candidates who can best match the linguistic style of standard language "are normally at an advantage" (p. 143).

Another factor affecting the success of intercultural communication has to do with the ways in which people perceive information. Not only does culture affect communication behaviors, it also plays a role in how people process the world in which they live. People from different cultures "inhabit different sensory worlds. Selective screening of sensory data admits some things while filtering out others, so that experience as it is perceived through one set of culturally[-]patterned sensory screens is quite different from experience perceived through another" (Hall, 1966, p. 2). "People brought up in different cultures learn as children, without ever knowing that they have done so, to screen out one type of information while paying close

attention to another" (Hall, 1966, p. 44-5). When considering issues related to intercultural communication, there is value in examining the communication differences between the particular cultures of interest as well as the differing ways they perceive the messages they confront.

Learning differences across cultures

There are numerous factors related to students' learning that are a result of or connected to culture. In trying to understand factors that affect student learning in the classroom, there is value in considering how students approach learning. The literature reveals differences for students in terms of learning style preferences, cognitive styles, organizing strategies, and the ways in which information is received.

Hites and Casterline (1986) claim that people learn in many different ways, and evidence supports that learning style preferences exist within certain groups of people (p. 5). Hofstede (1986) states, "cross-cultural learning situations are fundamentally problematic for both [the student and the teacher]" (p. 303). One of the reasons contributing to the problematic nature of the interaction, according to Hofstede, is the difference in the cognitive abilities of the students and teachers from differing cultures (p. 303). Kleinfeld (1994) asserts, "Children from different cultural backgrounds - as a group - do seem to have distinctive patterns of intellectual abilities" (p. 151). Lieberman (1997) claims that there are differences across cultures in the cognitive styles used when solving problems (p. 192). Kaplan (1988) discusses differences in logic used by cultures. He notes that logic is not universal and differs across cultures (p. 208). As well, Springer & Deutch (1985) express that "cultures differ with respect to the processes used to deal with various situations" (p. 240). Stefani (1997) also acknowledges that culture impacts the "way students approach learning" (p. 351).

Damen (1987) identifies "three types of cognitive style that carry particular force



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in intercultural contexts. They are: field-dependence/field independence, reflectivity/impulsivity, and tolerance/intolerance of ambiguity" (p. 300-301). These three areas for difference help show the problematic nature of cultural differences in the classroom. In looking at the learning styles of "educationally disadvantaged students," or special-admission students as compared to regular-admission students, Gorham and Self (1986) found that special-admission students were more field dependent (p. 8). To further illustrate the potential for conflict in approaches to or styles of learning, imagine a student from a culture that values reflective thinking trying to learn in an environment that rewards impulsive guessing. "A case in point can be found among students from the Far East, especially Japan. To make a mistake is painful; to guess is to admit not having spent enough time in finding the correct answer" (Damen, 1987, p. 302). In the average American classroom, "... particularly at higher levels of education, field-independence, impulsivity (often called creativity), and intolerance of ambiguity are generally rewarded" (Damen, 1987, p. 302). In the book, Teaching Language Minority Students in the Multicultural Classroom, Scarcella (1990) cites research that indicates young Hispanic and Black students are more likely to be field-dependent than field-independent (p. 121). The issue of impulsivity versus reflexivity perhaps sheds light on why some students prefer to practice as they learn while others prefer to observe until they are ready to competently perform the task. In some cultures, students are expected and allowed to make mistakes as they learn experientially, while other cultures expect students to observe repeatedly before ever attempting to demonstrate the task (Grossman, 1995, p. 270).

Another distinction of learning that is influenced by culture has to do with how people receive information. Differences exist in terms of whether students learn more aurally, visually, or verbally.

Although all children without visual or auditory impairments learn both visually

> and aurally, there are significant culturally[-]influenced differences among students. It is important to know whether students' cultures prepare people to be primarily aural or visual learners, or both, because this would influence whether particular students would learn more efficiently if material were presented orally or visually. (Grossman, 1995, p. 268)

Finally, differences exist in the manner by which students organize information. Some students organize by making associations among topics that may not be outwardly stated (topic-associating style), and other students organize more linearly around a specific topic (topic-centering style). Au (1993) reports differences in the styles of African-American and European-American students; the African-American students used more of a topic-associating style (p. 96).

A Cultural-deficit perspective

An entire body of literature focuses on how education in our society is most accommodating to the mainstream culture. Not only is education geared toward the abilities and styles of mainstream culture, it also creates a situation where minority cultures are often viewed as deficient because they are less able or likely to master the goals and interests of mainstream culture, "that is, the cultural values, beliefs, and language of ethnic subgroups are viewed as deficient by the dominant culture" (Winborne & Dardaine-Ragguet, 1993, p. 196). According to this perspective, minority groups are placed at-risk because they are participating in an educational environment that is eurocentric in nature. Students who are outside of the dominant culture are likely to experience incongruity between the values, rules, and behaviors of his or her own culture and those of the school culture (Winborne & Dardaine-Ragguet, 1993, p. 196). "Individuals are inseparable from their cultural and social environments. Educators from the dominant culture often assume that traditional

methods are suitable for all students, regardless of culture" (Winborne & Dardaine-Ragguet, 1993, p. 196). This perspective considers minority students disadvantaged by an education system that is supposedly designed to foster learning in students, all students. Moreover, Hollins, King, and Hayman (1994) claim, "Traditional classroom instruction is based on mainstream cultural practices that either disregard important variations among groups of students or attempt to assimilate all students into mainstream ways of thinking and behaving" (p. 1). While I think Hollins et. al. make a keen observation in the above statement, they are certainly not the first to make such a claim. Over thirty years ago, at a time when the social structure was quite different from today, when it was in no way politically correct to speak of a cultural-deficit perspective of education, Hall (1966) acutely claimed the following:

> We tend to overlook ... the consequences of having one's senses conditioned by Negro culture while trying to cope with "white" teachers and "white" educational materials. Most important, we have consistently failed to accept the reality of different cultures within our national boundaries. Negroes, Indians, Spanish Americans, and Puerto Ricans are treated as though they were recalcitrant, undereducated, middle-class Americans of northern European heritage instead of what they really are: members of culturally differentiated enclaves with their own communication systems, institutions, and values. Because we Americans have an "a-cultural bias" we believe only in the superficial differences between the peoples of the world. Not only do we miss much of the richness which comes from knowing others but often we are slow to correct our actions when difficulties begin to develop. (Hall, 1966, p. 183)

Even today, in a social system that seems very different than 30 years ago, Hall's claim has great relevance. The incongruities between the culture of mainstream education and the diversity represented in the classroom are brought to life in many areas

relating to the classroom, including differing learning styles, differing desires for amount of stimulation, differing communication styles, and differing perceptions of the role of culture.

Research shows differences in the tendencies of groups when it comes to learning styles and approaches to learning (as explicated in a previous section of this essay). There are incongruities in the "learning style characteristics" of minority groups and the learning styles that are predominately accepted in mainstream education (Bennett, 1990, p. 158). Moreover, these incongruities between learning styles of minorities and those sought by mainstream education are related to the higher dropout rate of minorities (Bennett, 1990, p. 158).

Another area for difference is found in students' desires for the amount of stimulation encountered in the classroom. If education is mostly calm, with an instructor lecturing important information to students, some students who come from more active cultural backgrounds may become bored. "Students ... differ in terms of whether they function better in highly stimulating or more calm learning environments. African[-]American and Hispanic[-]American students are used to more stimulation than students typically experience in school" (Grossman, 1995, p. 270). Further, Grossman suggests that this may explain why African-American and Hispanic-American students do better in environments that involve several differing approaches to delivery of class material (p. 270).

The language use of a given culture may further explain why some cultures are placed at a disadvantage in education. For example, the African-American student may come from a culture that emphasizes an oral tradition, "as dictated by the black church, slavery, barber shop ritual, and popular culture appeal" (Gill, 1992, p. 225). Gill discusses how coming from an oral tradition can place a student in education who has had little experience with the written word. Further, Gill stresses that if the written

word is not emphasized early in life for African Americans of the oral tradition, they will likely experience great difficulty in composition classes (p. 228).

African Americans who speak a form of Black English, may realize that they are disadvantaged by a society that views such form of speech as inadequate, deviant, or wrong. There are differences in whether Black English is viewed as a language or dialect. Some may contend that viewing it as a dialect demeans the language and fails to recognize its origin. Jenkins (1982) states, "Above all, it is not just a sloppy or ungrammatical English, as it is so often regarded, but it has separate origins in Africa for some of its roots and a grammar and syntax of its own as well" (p. 98).

The problem can be exacerbated when members of the mainstream culture are unable to see how one's culture impacts his or her educational experience. It seems reasonable that many people, from whatever cultural background, may only view the world from their own perspective. Closemindedness is certainly not a new concept. However, because members of mainstream culture attend schools that cater to the mainstream culture, they may not be able to see incongruities between the mainstream culture and the educational needs and abilities of minority cultures. Those who have experienced the incongruities first hand are likely the ones who are able to see that education is not geared toward every student in the classroom. Pine and Hilliard (1991) offer the following explanation:

> As white students progress through the education system and move into the world of work, the development of their cognitive styles and their learning styles is linear and self-reinforcing. Seldom, if ever, are they required to be bicultural, bilingual, or bicognitive. (p. 197-8).

Moreover, white students "are subliminally socialized, enculturated, and oriented to believe that the western experience, culture, and world view are superior and dominant" (Pine & Hilliard, p. 198)

## CONCLUSION

Certainly, students are placed at-risk of performing poorly in school for many reasons. There must be countless factors internal to the student that affect his or her success. The purpose of this paper, however, was to show the impact of culture on student success. There is ample research on which to base a claim that students are placed at-risk because the culture of mainstream education fails to acknowledge and account for the many cultural differences that affect and exist in our classrooms. The students of today represent vast diversity, including diversity in communication behaviors, perceptions of others and self, and approaches to learning. With such great diversity, teachers must understand how students of differing cultures are affected by the instruction they encounter in the classroom. Students who possess and appreciate the communication behaviors and approaches to learning that are fostered and rewarded in the mainstream classroom are certainly at an advantage over those who possess differing communication behaviors and approaches to learning.

Researchers and teachers have difficult jobs. Those who continue to solely blame the students for their failure will continue to encounter failing students. No, we are not solely responsible for success or failure, but we are responsible to fulfill our roles as educators. Educators must realize that individual students are just that: individuals. To think that one approach or perspective is appropriate for all students, from all walks of life is shortsighted, to put it lightly. The contents of this essay call out for educators to understand the reasons why students are not succeeding academically. Researchers should continue to investigate ways to help students overcome risk barriers they possess and encounter. Teachers should continue to try to understand the uniqueness of every student and the ways in which those students can succeed. With concentrated effort and acceptance of responsibility on the part of



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educators, we can begin to make a difference for each and every student.

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